THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) At present there are 283 vacancies in various Grades in RPOs.

(c) No, Sir.

(d) Does not arise.

(e) and (f) The Government has been continually taking steps to fill up the existing vacancies at the RPOs. The Staff Selection Commission has recently made available dossiers of 57 Lower Division Clerks (LDCs), which are being processed to fill up the vacancies.

Shortage of staff in passport offices

2471. SHRI K. CHANDRAN PILLAI: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that there is steep increase in the number of passports issued by various Regional Passport Offices in the country;

(b) if so, the number of passports being issued every year from the year 2000 to 2004;

(c) whether it is also a fact that the staff strength at the RPOs are not increased in tune with the increasing work load; and

(d) if so, the steps taken by Government to overcome the shortage of staff?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) Number of passports issued year-wise is as under:—

Year	Number of passports issued
2000	22,43,033
2001	27,80,738
2002	26,66,555
2003	29,55,529
2004	33,52,780

(c) Yes, Sir.

(d) The Government has been taking steps to overcome the shortage of staff. The Staff Inspection Unit (SIU) of the Ministry of Finance has recently carried out a study of Passport Offices all over the country and their final report on augmentation of staff is awaited. The Staff Selection Commission has recently made available dossiers of 57 Lower Division Clerks (LDCs), which are bring processed to fill up the existing vacancies.

Promotion of Indian culture and Hindi abroad

†2472. SHRI LAXMINARAYAN SHARMA: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) the arrangements made in various embassies for propagation of Indian culture and Hindi;

(b) the activities carried out towards this goal during the past two years, and the role of ICCR in it; and

(c) the reason for which ICCR has not been entrusted for its empowerment to department of culture?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) to (c) Indian Mission/Posts abroad are actively engaged in promotion and propagation of Indian culture and Hindi. Many of the activities undertaken by them in this regard are organized in coordination with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which is an autonomous body of the Ministry of External Affairs. Indian Cultural Centres have also been specifically set up by the ICCR as required.

To showcase Indian culture abroad, 8 major exhibitions have been sent by ICCR during the last two years, apart from a number of smaller exhibitions. 199 Indian cultural troupes of music and dance forms were sent to various countries for performances, which were organized by the Mission/Posts in conjunction with local bodies. In addition, 5 life size statues, 18 busts of famous Indian personalities and a replica of the Ashoka Capital were unveiled abroad. As part of the Distinguished Outgoing Visitors Programme, the ICCR sent 137 distinguished scholars to various countries for giving lectures and for participating in different Seminars/Conferences.

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.